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AUTHOR	Hertling, Elizabeth
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ABSTRACT

This digest presents steps that school boards and district officials can take to find qualified applicants for vacant school-leadership positions. It discusses various long-term strategies, such as increasing the candidate pool through career ladders and recruiting teachers through internships and training programs, that districts can enact immediately. Once a vacancy arises, the first step in conducting a principal search is to announce the position. A job model or description should accompany the announcement, and those with hiring authority should have a set of criteria for selection before beginning the screening process. Typically, screening is a two-step process. After the personnel office reviews resumes and applications for candidates, a more formalized paper screening of qualified candidates is performed. Screeners should use a standardized ranking system to rank applicants systematically before issuing invitations for interviews. The text includes suggestions for conducting an effective interview. The district must ensure that an interviewer is trained to make the most of an interview. Interviews are more effective when all candidates are asked identical, predetermined, well-thought-out questions. Districts can make a principalship more attractive to candidates by emphasizing the principal's role of instructional leadership and de-emphasizing budgetary and legal responsibilities. (Contains 13 references.) (RJM)

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Conducting a Principal Search

By Elizabeth Hertling

Educators know that a principal can make or break a school. The job is a difficult one, and filling a vacancy can be "as elusive as the search for the Holy Grail" (Jones 1995). School districts are struggling to complete that elusive quest nationwide in the face of a shortage of administrative candidates for the principalship. In 1998, fifty percent of 400 superintendents surveyed reported trouble filling principal vacancies (Educational Research Service and others 1998).

Why does this shortage of candidates exist? One reason is that an increasing number of school administrators are retiring. The U.S Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that over the next decade, 80,000 principals will either retire or leave the profession (Jones). Others cite low pay, demanding hours, and stress as reasons fewer are attracted to the principalship. The growing demand for accountability and the increased influence of parents also turn off some school leaders. "It seemed like I spent all my time fighting," says Jim Ford, a standout principal who left his position (Williams 1999).

This Digest addresses the steps school boards and district officials can take to find qualified applicants for vacant school leadership positions.

How Can School Districts Increase the Candidate Pool?

Preventive measures to increase the pool of qualified candidates for the position can simplify a search. Anderson (1991) recommends developing a pool of qualified candidates inside the school by creating career ladders. For career ladders to work, he says, districts must give the individuals who occupy these positions sufficiently diverse experience to qualify them for the principalship. For example, assistant principals should not be treated as "single-facet administrators" good only as disciplinarians or directors of activities (Anderson).

Recruiting teachers through internships and training programs is another way of increasing the pool of qualified principal candidates. Barker (1997) tells districts to be aggressive: identify the professional and personal benefits of the principalship and then sell those benefits to talented teachers. Districts should also make sure the salary differential between the two positions is sufficiently large to motivate teachers to take on the responsibilities of the principalship.

At California's Oxnard Union High School District, the staff-development coordinator meets monthly with a hand-picked group of classroom teachers to discuss leadership and other topics essential to the principal's role. These teachers are given opportunities to shadow principals and to learn about credential and degree programs in educational administration (Adams 1999).

Where Does the Principal Search Begin?

The first step in conducting a principal search is to announce that there is a vacancy. Seyfarth (1996) recommends first preparing a job model or job description. Because the duties differ from district to district and school to school, Seyfarth suggests interviewing those who currently hold the position. Ask staff members, parents, and students to describe what they believe the school needs from their principal, Jones adds. The list of duties can then be converted into an inventory of results sought, and finally, descriptions of the job environment and priority actions can be included (Seyfarth).

By completing a job model, district officials may avoid a common problem: vacancy announcements that are too vague, often not even specifying the particular school where the opening exists (Anderson). An announcement that lists the special needs and characteristics of a school is more likely to attract good candidates, as well as increase the chances of selecting the right person for the job.

Elements in vacancy announcements include the required tasks to be accomplished by the person filling the position; important characteristics of the staff; students' family backgrounds, cultures, and feelings about the school; as well as information about other executives in the school system (Anderson).

Once the vacancy announcement is written, where should administrators advertise? Many districts announce all vacancies to current employees. Publications such as *Education Week* and newspapers should be considered, as well as state and national professional associations.

Anderson argues that having a set of criteria for selection before beginning the screening process is vital to the success of the search process. He cites Baltzell and Dentler's study (1983), which found that districts that put off establishing a list of criteria often did not hire based on skill or merit, but on how a candidate would fit into their district, thereby maintaining the existing system. All these elements of advertising a principal vacancy involve one very critical step: Know your school (Jones).

Who Does the Screening?

Typically, screening is a two-step process. First, the personnel office screens resumes and applications for candidates who meet specific certification and experience standards. Next comes the more formalized step of paper screening of those candidates who pass the initial screening. Anderson suggests that this is where many districts begin to fail in their search

EA 030 130

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process. What is needed, he says, is a standardized ranking system by which screeners can systematically rank applicants. As well, it is important to include others besides senior administrators in the screening process: teachers, principals, parents, and even students.

There are many different options available to districts in this step in their search. One is the use of an assessment center to screen potential candidates. The candidates participate in simulations that help districts to pinpoint potential principals' specific strengths in such professional areas as problem analysis, judgment, decisiveness, and leadership (Anderson).

Another option is the use of written assessments. Writing assignments help screeners assess not only the candidate's beliefs, but communication skills as well (Anderson).

What Constitutes an Effective Interview?

Although the interview is the most widely used and most influential tool in hiring decisions, it is neither valid nor reliable if used incorrectly. Anderson notes that the typical interview is unstructured, lasts less than one hour, and is highly influenced by first impressions. Studies suggest that interviewers may decide to hire or reject an applicant within the first five minutes of an interview (Anderson).

How can interviews be made to work? The first step is to determine who will interview the candidates. Interviewers should posses such qualities as alertness to cues, ability to make fine distinctions, and ability to suppress biases, Anderson says. In some exemplary districts, he says, superintendents establish the selection process, but then wait until a committee of parents, teachers, and principals identify two or three top candidates. Winter and others (1998) recommend training for interviewers, particularly teachers who may search for an instructional leader and overlook other important administrative qualities.

The structure of the interview process can vary. The interview itself, argues Anderson, is more effective and reliable when all candidates are asked identical, predetermined, well-thought-out questions. One school district sums up the questioning process by saying, "Tell us what you would do, show us what you would do, let us ask others what you have done in similar situations" (Jones).

Some districts ask applicants to demonstrate their skills in a performance simulation, such as watching a twenty-minute classroom lesson designed specifically for the interview by a staff-development teacher. The applicant then prepares an observation report and holds a conference with the teacher who conducted the lesson (Anderson).

As for the actual process of the interview, only a few members of the interviewing team should conduct the initial interviews, suggests Raisch (1993). Then, once the candidates have been narrowed down, the entire team can be divided into panels, and the candidates can move from one group to the next. The superintendent then asks for the names of two or three people who seemed the most qualified; he or she also asks the group to talk generally about the candidates.

Another step may be to visit the finalists at their "home turf." As well, superintendents must check references. Barone (1994) warns administrators to look out for misleading references that should send up a red flag, including descriptions such as "a real workaholic." That person may accomplish in 80 hours what another could do in 40. "Always accessible" may mean that the person will drop everything to see whomever asks, indicating a lack of time-management skills.

How Can Districts Make the Principalship More Attractive?

Can school districts change the structure of the principalship to make the position more attractive to some qualified candidates? Some observers believe that, to provide more incentives for talented administrators, the position of principal needs to be restructured.

McAdams recommends that districts preserve the principal's role of instructional leadership by placing less emphasis on budgetary and legal responsibilities. To do this, districts would need to add support-services personnel.

In the Oxnard School District, Superintendent Richard Duarte, with the school board's approval, has placed a coadministrator at each elementary school with an enrollment of 900 or more. Likewise, in Thousand Oaks, California, the Conejo Unified School District has authorized vice-principalships for its three elementary schools that exceed 700 enrollment (Adams).

Giving principals more authority to make decisions would free them to perform at their highest level of efficiency. Barker advocates higher salaries for principals and stronger mentoring systems for new principals. Job sharing is also an option for districts. Two people shouldering the responsibilities can ease the stress and isolation that many administrators may feel.

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